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Faulty Ayotzinapa probe indicts Mexico's drug war

Mexican authorities should launch a more robust investigation into the fate of the missing students

September 25, 2015 2:00AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#) [@LCarasik](#)

A year ago Saturday, 43 Mexican students from the Ayotzinapa rural teachers' college went missing in the city of Iguala. Authorities said the students were abducted by municipal police and turned over to members of a local drug gang, who killed them and incinerated their bodies. A new investigation by an international panel of experts appointed by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) [released on Sept. 6](#) contradicts that claim. In a withering 560-page report, it said the sustained, coordinated and vicious nature of the attacks indicate a far more sinister and sweeping plot, refuting the government's account of the students' fate.

"This report provides an utterly damning indictment of Mexico's handling of the worst human rights atrocity in recent memory," [José Miguel Vivanco](#), the Americas director at Human Rights Watch, said on Sept. 6. "Even with the world watching and with substantial resources at hand, the authorities proved unable or unwilling to conduct a serious investigation."

In January, Mexico's Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam announced the case was closed, raising concerns that the truth would be permanently obscured, the public outcry would dissipate and the students would join tens of thousands of others for whom truth and justice are elusive.

"This is the historic truth of the events," Karam [said](#) at the time, citing forensic evidence and the confessions of those allegedly involved in the students'

abduction, killing or cremation. “This has been an exhaustive, deep and serious investigation.”

However, instead of diligently uncovering the truth, Mexican authorities put forth an implausible theory that placed blame solely on local actors. Officials originally maintained that the motive for the attack was to thwart a planned protest at a speech by the wife of Iguala’s mayor, but she was done speaking before the attack began. They later said the students might have been mistaken for a rival drug gang, though federal authorities were monitoring the students from the moment they left Ayotzinapa. The IACHR report found that forensic evidence at the alleged burn site refutes claims of mass incineration. A charred bone fragment from one of the missing students was found among the ashes, but previous investigators, including a [forensic team from Argentina](#), openly questioned whether it was burned there. And it is clear that the local police did not act alone. State and federal police were at least aware of the attacks at nine locations, which were more than three hours apart, but failed to intervene. Military intelligence officers were seen at two of the attack scenes.

The government destroyed or mishandled evidence, including closed-circuit video recordings and official communications. It has refused to allow the panel of experts to question army officers. One of the five buses carrying the disappeared students has never been located. And authorities relied on testimony obtained from gang members and officers who later alleged they were tortured — a familiar tactic for security forces.

Many questions remain unanswered, but one thing is clear: The Mexican government has been hiding the truth from the public. The IACHR report recommends that the government investigate the theory that the students unknowingly commandeered a bus with filled with illicit cash or drugs, provoking the brutality and coordination of the response.

If Peña Nieto truly wants to close this bloody chapter, he should end the war on drugs that is making the narco-trade obscenely profitable and brutally violent.

The experts declined to draw conclusions about the fate of the missing students, saying they should still be considered disappeared. Grieving relatives have embraced the report, vindicated in their refusal to accept the falsified story or forsake their loved ones. A year after that grisly attack — without bodies to bury — the anguished families continue to cling to the faint hope that their beloved sons, brothers and husbands will defy the odds and turn up alive.

The uncertainty amplifies the cruelty of enforced disappearances, as does the pain inflicted by the government's callousness in advancing misleading accounts in the aftermath of the tragedy. But the attack's savagery is ominous. Among the six people killed during the attack was first-year student Julio César Mondragón Fontes, who was found with his eyes gouged out and face and ears severed, leaving his wife and young child with grim prospects of escaping poverty.

On Oct. 4, in an effort to defuse the growing public despair of families, prosecutors announced that they uncovered mass burial sites containing the remains of 28 people. None of them turned out to be the missing students, but their exhumation also unearthed the horrific normality of clandestine graves. Over the past year, [at least 129 bodies](#) have been found in graves in the hills surrounding Iguala.

The missing Ayotzinapa students are emblematic of a much larger problem of corruption and impunity in Mexico. Since 2006, the U.S.-backed war on drugs has cost an estimated 100,000 Mexicans their lives, and more than 25,000 have been disappeared, though the real numbers may be far higher. [Torture](#) by law enforcement authorities has become widespread. Impunity is the norm: By the government's own [estimate](#), nearly 94 percent of crimes went unpunished in 2013.

The targeting of students from a teachers' school serving impoverished rural and mostly indigenous areas shattered the well-crafted war-on-drugs narrative that maintains that the victims of violence are criminal elements whose deaths are undeserving of fury, compassion or justice and that the government has clean hands. Yet Washington continues to send massive amounts of security aid to the Mexican government to fight the war on drugs — some [\\$3 billion since 2008](#).

Mexicans have grown accustomed to collusion between the state and organized criminal elements and the pervasive violence and stubborn impunity it engenders. But the latest revelations further sully the reformer image that President Enrique Peña Nieto worked hard to cultivate. He has been dogged by corruption scandals, soaring violence, a sagging economy and the embarrassing escape of drug kingpin Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzman.

The IACHR report will likely stoke fury and buttress massive protests planned to mark the first anniversary of the students' disappearance. In a welcome gesture, Peña Nieto's administration has said prosecutors would consider aspects of the latest revelations. But instead of committing to discovering the truth, authorities appear to be doubling down on the discredited theory, arresting a [gang leader](#) and announcing the [questionable claim](#) that a bone fragment from another student was conclusively identified.

If Mexico wants to end the killings and enforced disappearances of its citizens, it should muster the political will to launch an expansive investigation into the fate of the students and root out the institutional dysfunction and malfeasance that discredited the initial report. Justice for the disappeared requires the truth, however damning it is for the state, and accountability for all the perpetrators, not merely the lowest-level actors. And if Peña Nieto truly wants to close this bloody chapter, he should end the war on drugs that is making the narco-trade obscenely profitable and brutally violent and corruption difficult to uproot. Given its massive investment in the militarization of counternarcotics efforts and its status as the primary consumer market, the U.S. should follow suit.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.